

The Eclipse Between Us

CHAPTER 10

Ethan stood at the edge of the forest, shifting his weight as the night deepened. The air had gone strangely still, not even a leaf stirring overhead. Shadows crept across the moon as the eclipse swallowed its light. He pulled out his pocket watch and flicked it open. Ten minutes past the hour. His father's engraved initials glinted faintly beneath the darkening sky.



“Where is she?” he muttered, eyes staring down the empty path that led back toward the Academy. The eclipse had already begun. Every passing second mattered, and Luna was nowhere in sight.

He snapped the watch shut. The click cracked through the silence. His jaw tightened. Had she forgotten? No chance. Luna could be unpredictable enough to drive him mad, but careless? Never. She knew what tonight meant.

“Dammit,” he whispered. The word caught in his throat as unease crawled beneath his skin. What if something had happened to her? Worse, what if the traitor had gotten to her first?

His thumb dragged across the edge of the pocket watch as he searched the path again. Empty. He couldn't waste their only chance standing here, but he couldn't go on without Luna either. She was his partner. If she were in trouble and he abandoned her for the mission, he would never forgive himself. Ethan blew out a hard breath, spun toward the Academy, and broke into a sprint.

By the time he reached the main hall, music pulsed through the walls, threaded with laughter and the murmur of dozens of voices. The dance had started. Ethan slowed, catching his breath as his boots skimmed softly over the polished stone floor. Keeping close to the wall, he moved toward Harmony Court.

Voices floated down the corridor, bright and familiar. Luna's friends. Ethan stopped cold, a frown tightening across his face.

Why was she here?

"I'm telling you, Lu, you have to come to the dance tonight!" Tessa's voice practically bounced off the walls. "We've been buried in projects for weeks. We deserve one night where we're not staring at books until our eyes fall out. Besides, you were excited about it before!"

"But I promised Ethan I'd..." Luna's voice trailed off, uncertain. The unfinished sentence hung in the corridor, and Ethan edged closer, barely breathing.

"Oh, please!" Tessa scoffed. "That guy practically

worships his grades. He's a total nerd. You've probably already done enough to ace your project, anyway. He's just trying to keep you away from everyone else, Luna. It's weird."

"The dance only happens once," Vera added softly, her tone hesitant but hopeful. "We all want you there."

Ethan went rigid. Each word seemed to land squarely against his ribs. He'd always known they weren't exactly his biggest fans, but hearing what they truly thought of him stung in a way he hadn't expected. But even worse was Luna's silence. The distant music seemed to recede as he strained to hear Luna's answer. Was that really how they saw him?

Luna finally answered, her voice barely above a murmur. "Maybe just for a little bit..."

Ethan's grip tightened around the pocket watch. The voices beyond the wall blurred except for the echo of Luna's answer. It was the only thing he could hear. For one stunned heartbeat, he couldn't move. After everything? Weeks of following clues, nights without sleep, every risk they'd taken, and she was ditching him now?

His fingers curled until his nails bit into his palms. He wanted to march around the corner and ask her exactly what she thought she was doing. Instead, he stayed where he was, locked in place, jaw clenched, forcing down the ache burning behind his anger.

I was right all along, he thought bitterly. She's just like the rest of them. Another Academy snob who'd rather chase music

and lights than keep her word.

Heat still simmered beneath Ethan's skin when he stepped away from the column, drawing a slow breath in through his nose. As he turned, he nearly collided with Elara. She stopped short, studying him with one raised eyebrow.



"Ethan," she said, her tone cautious. "You look... off. Are you going to the dance tonight?"

He shook his head, not meeting her eyes. "No," he said shortly. "I've got something more important to do."

Her frown deepened. "Something else to do? It's practically starting, and you look like you're ready to pick a fight."

"I'm fine," he muttered, brushing past her. The last thing he wanted was another speech about balance, obsession, or learning how to relax.

"Ethan..." Elara called after him, but he kept walking, his footsteps striking harder against the stone with every step. Whatever waited for him tonight, he'd deal with it alone.

Moments later, Ethan tore through the forest, his boots grinding leaves and twigs into the damp earth. Each breath scraped cold against his throat. Around him, the woods had fallen unnaturally quiet, not a birdcall or rustle breaking the

stillness. Above the branches, the eclipse stained the night in a deep red glow that washed across his hands like blood. He ignored the chill crawling along his spine and kept moving. He'd come too far to stop now.

At last, he reached the place marked in the old book, a narrow clearing concealed behind a wall of twisted brush. Ethan pushed through the branches and searched the ground, the trees, anything that might reveal another clue. Nothing. The trail ended here.

"What now?" he muttered, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the medallion. Its familiar weight settled into his palm, yet beneath the crimson light, it somehow felt different. If the illustration in the book had been right, this was the key.

He raised the medallion and whispered one of the revealing spells Luna had taught him.

A tiny spark leapt from his fingertips and traced the metal's edge. Nothing.

Ethan frowned and tried again, slower this time. The spark circled the medallion, flickered across the carved runes, then vanished without a response.

"Come on," he muttered.

He turned the medallion in his hand, searching its surface for something he'd missed. Then the clouds shifted overhead, and a narrow beam of crimson eclipse light broke through. The moment it struck the medallion, the runes shimmered.

Ethan went still. Of course.

He whispered the revealing spell again. This time, the spark caught. Light raced through the runes one by one, each symbol brightening beneath the eclipse glow in a deliberate sequence.

A soft click broke the silence. Ethan stared as the medallion shifted beneath his fingers and opened like a locket. A tiny mirror gleamed inside one half, while the other revealed a delicate map traced with barely visible lines.

He studied the map for only a moment before angling the mirror toward the sky. The eclipse had appeared again and again in everything they had uncovered. Its crimson light had to matter.

The red beam struck the mirror and flashed across its polished surface before spilling over the map. Glowing lines suddenly appeared, forming a path that wound deeper into the forest.

Ethan closed his fingers around the medallion and followed. He moved carefully, glancing over his shoulder whenever a branch shifted or a leaf stirred. The silence seemed to crowd around him, thick enough to touch, and every crunch beneath his boots sounded far too loud.

He hated how empty the forest felt without Luna beside him, without her calm voice or quiet confidence cutting through his doubts.



The glowing trail guided him into a dark hollow. Ahead, nearly swallowed by roots and shadow, the mouth of a cave waited. Ethan swallowed against the tightness in his throat and stepped inside.

In there, the blackness consumed him. It took time for his eyes to adjust, and when they did, there was little to see: wet stone glistened innocently along the walls, droplets tapped against the ground, and a narrow tunnel descended into the earth. Without the eclipse light, the map had gone blank. Ethan kept moving anyway. Damp air chilled his skin, heavy with the smell of moss, wet rock, and soil.

The tunnel seemed determined never to end. More than once, Ethan slowed, tempted to turn around.

Finally, a faint glimmer appeared ahead. It stopped him mid-step. He stared into the darkness, then tightened his grip on the medallion. He moved faster. His heart kicked harder. Ethan hurried toward it until the passage opened into a broad chamber. At its center rested a small pool, catching a thin shaft of red light that slipped through a crack high overhead.

Ethan approached the water cautiously, each step slower than the last as the silver glow rippled across the stone. Acting on instinct, he lifted the medallion's mirror into the beam. Crimson light struck the glass and reflected into the pool. Ripples spread across the surface, and before his eyes, the

crimson radiance transformed into gleaming silver.

Slowly, the pool began to part. A stone platform rose from beneath the water, droplets spilling from its edges in glistening trails.

At its center rested the Celestial Sphere.

It was no larger than Ethan's two cupped hands, its surface smooth and translucent, somewhere between crystal and polished glass. Threads of silver-blue light drifted beneath its surface like miniature constellations, shifting whenever he moved. The air around it carried a faint vibration that traveled through the stone and into the soles of his boots, leaving a strange pressure behind his teeth.

Ethan stared.

For all the sketches, descriptions, and half-buried references they had uncovered, none of them had prepared him for seeing this.

His breath slipped out in a quiet laugh. "Just like that, huh?"

He'd done it. He'd actually found it.

Ethan then reached forward, his hand trembling, fingertips hovering inches above the Sphere-

A sudden invisible force crashed into him, hurling him backward and nearly knocking him off his feet.

“What?” Ethan barely managed the word before the force struck again, sending him stumbling back. Light and shadow blurred across his vision. “No... no, come on!” He lunged toward the Sphere, but the invisible barrier hurled him back even harder than before.

Then he understood. The blood magic. Of course. Only the mage’s kin could claim the Sphere. After weeks of searching, sleepless nights, and risks that had nearly gotten them caught, Ethan had finally found it - only to discover he could never take it.

His fingers slowly curled into fists. He stared at the Sphere glowing calmly just beyond his reach, close enough to touch, but completely impossible to claim.

Still, at least he’d found it. That had to count for something. Now that he knew where it was, he could-

Footsteps. Soft. Deliberate. In an instant, directly behind him.

Ethan spun, eyes widening, but something heavy struck the side of his head before he could react. The chamber lurched sideways, light and shadow twisting together.

Then a second blow, and the world disappeared.

Far above the hidden chamber, the blood-red eclipse

stretched past the forest and across the Academy grounds, staining the towers and windows crimson. Inside the ballroom, golden lanterns glowed against that ominous light, and music and laughter carried on as though nothing beyond the walls had changed.



Luna stood amid the grand sweep of the ballroom, excitement fluttering through her as music swelled and laughter rolled across the hall. Floating lanterns bathed the marble floor in warm gold, while charmed ivy twisted around the columns.

Everywhere she looked, dresses flashed in sapphire, ruby, and gold. Her own silver gown shimmered whenever she moved, catching the light like moonlit water. She had to admit it - her friends had been right to make her wear it.

A small smile tugged at her lips as she spun between Tessa and Vera, the music lifting them into the moment. For the first time in weeks, Luna let the weight slip from her shoulders. Ancient magic, impossible riddles, unanswered questions - for a few precious minutes, none of it mattered.

Tessa laughed, caught Luna's hand, and yanked her into another spin. "See? This is exactly what you needed girlfriend!" she said between laughs. "Keep glaring at books like that and you'll have permanent wrinkles before graduation!"

Luna laughed with her, surprised by how easily the sound came. The knot she'd been carrying for weeks loosened. Here, she wasn't the Academy's top student or the daughter of a high-ranking mage. She was simply Luna, dancing beneath golden lanterns with her friends.

The orchestra surged into a livelier tempo, and Luna surrendered to its pull, skirt swirling around her legs and hair brushing her shoulders. Then, halfway through a turn, Ethan's face flashed through her mind - that serious expression, that relentless focus, the determination that never seemed to leave him.

Her smile faded. Luna glanced toward the enormous clock above the hall, and guilt pinched beneath her ribs. She was supposed to meet him. Tonight wasn't just another night. They had a mission.

Tessa caught her hand before she could step away. "Lu, stay for one more song. You helped us plan this for weeks, and you've barely let yourself enjoy any of it."

Luna looked toward the ballroom doors. Ethan was waiting. She knew that. But Tessa's words found the part of her that was tired of ancient books, secret passages, and carrying responsibilities no one else seemed to notice. She had spent weeks helping create this special night, only to spend most of it thinking about being somewhere else.

"One more song," Luna said, the words feeling more like a bargain with herself than an answer to Tessa. "Then I'm

leaving.”

Tessa smiled and pulled her back toward Vera.

Luna tried to sink back into the music again, but Ethan still lingered at the edge of every beat. She glanced at the clock once more and told herself she still had time. Then Vera spun her beneath the lanterns, Tessa caught them both laughing, and somewhere between one turn and the next, the orchestra slipped seamlessly into yet another song.

When Luna finally checked the clock again, cold settled in her stomach.

She had stayed much longer than she meant to. And Ethan was still waiting.

Luna looked toward the ballroom doors. The music suddenly felt too loud, the golden light almost accusing. She had made her choice, but she had stayed too long. If they missed their chance because of her, she would never forgive herself. She had enough. She turned to excuse herself-

Then the ballroom went black.

The floating lanterns flickered once more before vanishing. Darkness swallowed the hall so completely that Luna couldn't see anyone beside her. A wave of shocked gasps rippled through the crowd. The orchestra died in a squeal of strings and scraping chairs. For one breathless second, nobody moved.

Then something screamed. The sound was too sharp, too

unnatural, ripping through the darkness like claws against glass.

Luna's body locked. A whisper of cold brushed across her skin before the darkness took shape... But, she knew what was here, that presence. Umbra Wraiths.

The ballroom erupted. Students shouted and shoved toward the exits. Chairs crashed against the marble. Frantic spells burst in every direction as shadowy forms slinked forward from the darkness, stretching across the floor like spilled ink. Fear sharpened the air until Luna could practically taste it.

Luna's pulse jumped, but she forced the next one slower, planting her feet as her training took over. Luna thrust both hands forward, and golden light burst from her palms, spreading around the nearest students in a rippling shield. Black claws scraped against her barrier. The wraiths hissed and recoiled.

Another one lunged through the darkness. Luna quickly pivoted and drove both palms toward it. Light exploded across the creature's chest. Its shriek tore through the hall before its body dissolved into curling smoke.

Another shadow moved behind it. Then another. Dozens of them slithered across the marble. They were surrounded.

"Stay together!" Luna shouted, sending another pulse of light into the darkness as she searched desperately for Tessa and Vera.

"Vera! Tessa! Stay close to the light!" she yelled as she

spotted them crouched behind an overturned table, their faces drained of color beneath the glow of her shield. Students stumbled around them in panic. One boy rushed past with his robes torn open and terror blazing in his eyes. Most of them had spent their lives practicing spells in classrooms. Nothing had prepared them for this reality.

“Everyone, use light spells, now!” Luna yelled until her throat burned. But the ballroom had already become a battlefield. Screams, shouted incantations, breaking furniture, and the wail of wraiths crashed together into one deafening roar.

Pain spread through Luna’s shoulders as she raised barrier after barrier. Each blast of magic burned brighter against the darkness, forcing the wraiths backward, but every spell cost her. Her breathing grew ragged. Shadows crowded the edges of her vision. She clenched her jaw and lifted her hands again. And again. She couldn’t stop.

Orange fire suddenly tore through the blackness. Alden stepped beside her, soot streaked across his face as he hurled a blazing spell into an advancing wraith. “Where’s Ethan?” he shouted, spinning to intercept another creature with a burst of flame.

Luna froze. The question struck deeper than any spell.

She didn’t know.

For one terrible instant, the light around her flickered. Where was Ethan? Had the wraiths found him already? He had gone into the forest alone, without combat training, and

without her. The light between Luna's hands flickered. While she had been dancing beneath golden lanterns, Ethan had been facing whatever waited in the forest, alone. She had left him alone. All alone.

"I - I don't know," Luna stammered. She threw out a hand, unleashing a brilliant surge that shattered the charging wraith, but Alden's question kept pounding through her thoughts. Where's Ethan?

The teachers were now entering the battle in force, barriers blazing to life as spells tore through the invading shadows. Their voices rang above the chaos, rallying students and driving the wraiths back. They guided students toward the exits.

The wraiths were beginning to retreat, but Luna barely noticed. She finally had a chance to leave. The problem was, she had no idea where Ethan had gone.

Before she could decide, a small figure shoved through the fleeing students. "Alden!"

Luna turned as Alden deflected another attack. "Elara?" he shouted, breathing hard.

Elara's face looked almost white beneath the fractured light. "Ethan! I saw Ethan earlier. He was heading towards the forest. I think he went there alone!"

The words hit Luna like ice. For a moment, she forgot how to breathe. No. No, he didn't. He wouldn't. But even as

she thought it, she knew better. Of course he had.

Her hands shook as she launched another beam of light. Ethan, what have you done? If the wraiths had reached the forest...

Luna threw one last barrier around Tessa, Vera, and the students clustered near them. Golden light arched overhead, locking into place like a glowing dome. Then she turned and ran, every heartbeat pounding Ethan's name.

"Wait!"

Luna skidded to a stop. Elara pushed through the crowd toward her, hair tangled around her face and determination burning in her eyes. "I saw where Ethan went," she said, breathless. "I'm coming with you."

Before Luna could answer, Alden reached them, the edges of his robes blackened by fire. "If Ethan's in danger, I'm going too."

Luna hesitated, unease twisting in her chest. "Alden," she said, her tone sharp. "I don't know if-

"That's my best friend out there," he cut in, staring straight at her. "I'm not staying behind."

Luna pressed her lips together. Suspicion whispered at the back of her mind. What if he's involved? What if all of this somehow leads back to him? Then she saw the fear in Elara's eyes. There was no time.

“Fine,” Luna said, forcing steadiness into her voice. “Let’s go.”

Ethan was somewhere beneath the blood-red moon, alone. The thought drove Luna forward faster than fear could slow her. Ahead, the forest rose against the night like a wall of shadow.



She ran toward it, heart hammering, determination burning hotter with every step. Whatever waited among those trees, she would face it. The others followed.

They had to find Ethan before the darkness did.